

## **Post-Event Summary Report**

**Name of Event:**

*Senior Centers Prepare for Aging Baby Boomers: Challenges and Solutions,*  
A One-day Conference

**Date of Event:** June 23, 2005

**Location of Event:**

Dayton Airport Hotel  
Dayton International Airport  
3330 Terminal Road  
Vandalia, Ohio 45377

**Number of Persons Attending:** 78

**Sponsoring Organization:**

Area Agency on Aging, PSA 2  
6 South Patterson Boulevard  
Dayton, Ohio 45402-2133

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**Priority Issue #1: Attracting Baby Boomers**

To attract the new generation of baby boomers, senior centers need to rethink their mission and address how the wants and needs of the boomers differ from the wants and needs of the current older generation, and how the generations can successfully co-exist. The viability of senior centers depends on their ability to adapt and change to meet diverse needs, between and within generations.

**Barriers:**

- Boomers don't want to acknowledge themselves as "aging" and don't want to be classified as "seniors."
- Boomers are still working and expect to continue working longer than the previous generation. The usual Monday through Friday daytime hours of centers are not convenient for working boomers.

- Boomers are still raising children and, increasingly, also caring for aging parents.
- Boomers are not familiar with senior centers, where they are, or what they offer.
- Boomers are not “joiners,” preferring independent activities.
- They are generally less community minded and are not known for volunteering.
- Boomers may think of current senior center participants as frail and dependent.
- Programs now offered at senior centers do not appeal to boomers. They are more interested in physical fitness and education. **“I am not my father.”**
- Current senior center participants may not welcome boomers who want to change the status quo.
- Senior center staff may find change difficult. Change takes effort and may alienate current members.
- Funding for social and recreational purposes is very difficult to obtain.
- Senior center buildings may not accommodate activities and programs preferred by boomers.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- Conduct a needs assessment to determine boomers’ needs and wants.
- Market the senior center to potential participants and supporters on an ongoing basis.
- Develop a website with links to other community websites.
- Change the name from “senior center” to “community center.”
- Become a comprehensive information resource, on-site and on-line.
- Develop activities and programming boomers want, including more challenging physical activities, an emphasis on wellness, and life-long learning opportunities.
- Lower the age of membership to 50.
- Offer active travel opportunities, and popular cultural and arts events.
- Change center hours to include some evening and weekend hours.
- Update the atmosphere at senior centers. Try “wine and cheese” instead of “punch and cookies.” Introduce a “coffee house” area with online access for laptops and music favored by boomers. Offer a members dating service.
- Recruit boomers as board members, instructors, or volunteers while they are still working.
- Offer one-time or one-event volunteer opportunities instead of long-term commitments.
- Give boomers responsibility for planning and making choices.
- Offer community education about normal aging to dispel myths.
- Retain a mix of programs and activities enjoyed by current members.
- Engage current members as a “welcoming committee” for new members.
- Train staff to meet the challenges of initiating and incorporating change.

## **Priority Issue #2: Redefining the Image of Senior Centers**

The perception of senior centers is that they are for frail, dependent older people.

### **Barriers:**

- Ageism is a persistent barrier. Older adults are either ignored, or portrayed as unattractive, ill, or incompetent by the media.
- Centers are perceived as serving frail, dependent, and mostly poor people.
- Center participants are generally the older segment of the over-60 population.
- Program choice is limited. Most activities are recreational or social and are targeted to less active people.
- Current participants do not want to change how things are done and want to retain the programs they now have.
- Current participants want to preserve the identity of the center as a place exclusively for seniors.
- Staff, not seniors, plan activities and programs.
- Staff is interested in preserving the status quo, not in initiating change.
- The name "Senior Center" discourages participation by those who do not like to be called "seniors."
- The center is unattractive, too small, and/or furnishings and décor are dated.
- Lack of transportation prevents many individuals from participating.
- Centers must compete with health clubs and recreation centers for members.
- Centers struggle with defining their mission. Most are social or recreational in nature, while some offer in-home services such as personal care.
- Funding sources are limited and are decreasing.

### **Proposed Solutions**

- Develop a long-range plan to take the center into the next 5- to 10-year period.
- Develop a marketing campaign to inform the community about the center and the activities offered.
- Promote the center as an information and resource center.
- Offer education about health and wellness, safety, and current issues such as identity theft, Social Security, medication plans, and legal issues affecting seniors.
- Involve members in planning.
- Change the name to "Community Center."
- Expand and improve the quality and quantity of activities. Ask for member input.
- Increase attendance by men. Seek their input to develop the activities of interest to men.
- Educate long-term members about the need for change as conditions change.
- Develop a "senior speaker corp" ready to speak to community organizations.
- Develop a "greeter corp" to welcome visitors and new members.
- Make the center attractive and accessible.
- Explore alternative funding sources.

### **Priority Issue #3: Linking the Generations**

Senior centers can educate the community about normal aging and help combat ageism by being open to intergenerational activities within the center and the community.

#### **Barriers:**

- Senior centers are detached from the community at large.
- Seniors prefer to interact with their own age group.
- Younger people have misconceptions about older people.
- Policy decisions may exclude younger people from senior centers.
- The interests of generations differ.

#### **Proposed Solutions:**

- Offer inter-generational activities.
- Invite families to take part in or sponsor special events for senior center members.
- Advocate for all ages, focusing on common issues.
- Invite schools to present musical performances at the senior center.
- Offer to give talks to schoolchildren about aging.
- Establish an Adopt-a-Grandparent program.
- Establish an after-school program with seniors as tutors and mentors of children.
- Attract grandparents raising grandchildren by providing childcare while grandparents enjoy adult activities.
- Attract caregivers by providing adult day programs for their loved ones while caregivers enjoy adult activities.
- Change the name to “Community Center” to promote intergenerational participation.
- Offer travel with grandchildren trips.

### **Priority Issue #4: Fostering Diversity**

Changing demographics are challenging senior centers to provide culturally sensitive programming.

#### **Barriers:**

- Stereotypes are difficult to break down.
- Senior center staffs and boards are not diversified.
- Increased migration has led to language barriers.
- People have a desire to be with others like themselves.
- People of a different economic class or ethnic identity are not welcomed.
- Promoting diversity is not a core value expressed in center policies.

**Proposed Solutions:**

- Offer cultural diversity education to senior center members and staff.
- Recruit a diverse staff and board.
- Establish policies of inclusion from the top down.
- Reach into the community to recruit members from all cultural backgrounds.
- Welcome new members of all cultural backgrounds.
- Offer activities affordable for members at all economic levels.
- Offer culturally appropriate activities.
- Form partnerships with organizations whose members represent cultures different from the dominant culture of the senior center members.

**Priority Issue #5: Partnering**

Senior centers can benefit from partnerships with community agencies and the business community to maximize resources and develop support.

**Barriers:**

- Senior centers are operated as individual, stand-alone entities.
- Senior centers must compete for funds and resources.
- Turf issues keep senior centers in competition with each other.
- There is a lack of collaboration between centers and community agencies.
- Fear of change and reluctance to change the status quo keep centers doing things the same way.
- The local business community is not aware of the senior centers in their area and of the potential for partnership with centers.

**Proposed Solutions:**

- Encourage collaboration with other senior centers and community agencies around advocacy issues.
- Establish linkages with other senior centers and meet regularly to exchange information and ideas.
- Build relationships with the local business community.
- Build relationships with local government.
- Consider consolidation of some functions with other senior centers, such as purchasing material and supplies, sharing equipment, and sharing resources.